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Contact: Ann Edwards

THE BIRTH AND FLOWERING OF BRITISH ROMANTIC ART
May 1 - July 22, 1990

Romanticism, born in England in the late 18th century, was a complex artistic movement. While Romantic artists worked in widely different styles, they shared a belief in individual freedom of expression and the importance of imagination and emotions in creating a work of art.

The Birth and Flowering of British Romantic Art, an exhibition on view at The Cleveland Museum of Art from May 1 through July 22, 1990, explores aspects of Romanticism in British graphic art between 1760 and 1870. The seventy prints and drawings were selected from the collection of The Cleveland Museum of Art by Sabine Kretschmar, curatorial assistant in the Museum's Department of Prints and Drawings. They include works by Thomas Gainsborough, George Stubbs, William Blake, Samuel Palmer, Edward Calvert, and Joseph Mallord William Turner.

The chief characteristic of the Romantic attitude of mind is a sensitivity to nature, particularly in its awe-inspiring or idyllic aspects in which many artists saw reflections of the divine or metaphors for human feelings. Romantic artists also admired medieval culture and Gothic art, especially ruined abbeys and castles, which symbolized to them the transience of earthly things, and they were fascinated with picturesque, exotic, and far-away places. They found inspiration in poetry, in the work especially of Shakespeare, Milton, and Dante, and in the Bible and classical literature, choosing from these sources themes which emphasize the heroic, tragic,

horrific, or supernatural. Often linked to these sentiments was a heightened moral consciousness, which expressed itself in works of profound religious feeling as well as criticisms of contemporary society.

Early manifestations of Romanticism in late 18th-century graphic art include pastoral landscapes by Thomas Gainsborough and prints by James Watson reproducing the portraits of Sir Joshua Reynolds, in which expressions, poses, and settings reflect the emotional state of the sitters. A circle of British artists living in Rome in the 1770s--Henry Fuseli, George Romney, Alexander Runciman, and John Brown--favored Romantic themes, some drawn from history or literature, others purely imaginary. The most overtly Romantic work of this period in the exhibition is George Stubbs's 1777 etching and engraving, A Horse Frightened by a Lion, its drama intensified by the horse's windswept mane and the turbulent sky.

A major figure in British Romantic art was the visionary poet, painter, and engraver, William Blake (1757-1827). The twelve engravings by Blake in the exhibition include eight of the illustrations for his masterpiece, the Book of Job, engraved toward the end of his life. The masterful union of text and image, a characteristic of Blake's graphic art, was inspired by medieval illuminated manuscripts. Blake's art and mystical philosophy strongly influenced Samuel Palmer and Edward Calvert, both of whom created poetic arcadian landscapes--Palmer in intricately detailed etchings, Calvert in exquisite, small wood engravings and lithographs.

The great master of Romantic landscape painting, Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851), is represented by one of his luminous watercolors of Swiss landscape, Fluelen--Lake of Lucerne, and five works from his Liber Studiorum, a set of prints illustrating various styles of landscape composition.

Different approaches to landscape are seen in Richard Parkes Bonington's atmospheric lithographs of medieval French architecture, Edward Lear's sensitive drawing of Lake Maggiore in Italy, and Samuel Prout's watercolors of a Gothic cathedral and Roman ruins. David Lucas's mezzotints after paintings by John Constable convey Constable's deep understanding of nature and his acute observations of the effects of light and atmosphere on his native Suffolk landscape.

Thomas Rowlandson's caricatures of contemporary British society illustrate still another aspect of British Romantic art. Two prints by Rowlandson, from a popular work published in the early 19th century, The Tour of Dr. Syntax in Search of the Picturesque, poke fun at travelers using the newly published guides to picturesque sites in the British Isles.

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For additional information or photographs, please contact Ann Edwards, Public Information, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland OH 44016; 216/421-7340.